

County of Los Angeles

Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner

**Forensic Research Center (FRC)
and HRD K9 Training Facility**

Project Update

- Cal State LA continued support
- LASD collaboration
 - Meeting with Sheriff today
- Donation program research and planning
 - Dignity and security
 - Acquisition
 - UC San Diego (Westlake HS)
 - Final disposition
 - Memorial services
- County Annual Report
 - Highlighting LACo M/E-Coroner K9 Unit
 - Donation trust fund
- K9 memorial



← Back to Original Article

There's No Room for the Squeamish in Westlake High's Anatomy Class

December 28, 1994 | TRACY WILSON | SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Carefully inserting a thin metal pin into an abdominal muscle, 17-year-old Ellie Novin-Baheran started labeling: *External oblique. Umbilicus. Pectoralis major. Serratus anterior.*

Her assignment: identify and tag muscles on a human cadaver.

Ellie is one of 24 students in Westlake High School's acclaimed advanced anatomy class, a course in which students study and dissect human bodies.

Modeled after gross anatomy classes in medical school, the course is highly demanding of students' time--and money.

Students pay a \$90 lab fee and, despite donations from the medical community, must raise about \$1,200 each year to support the program's \$6,000 budget. Where do they get the money to buy four \$650 cadavers?

Bagel and candy sales.

"Yeah, it's a very expensive textbook," Ellie said of her cadaver, which she shares with five other students.

In addition to student efforts, Pierce Brothers Valley Oaks Memorial Park and Mortuary in Westlake Village gave Westlake High four body bags and will cremate the corpses at no cost. Their ashes will be scattered off the coast of Ventura. And Westlake Medical Center donated \$1,000 to the program this year.

Anand Patel, 17, a student in the so-called "cadaver class," doesn't mind raising funds to keep the program afloat. "It's worth it," he said. "I mean, how many high school students get to dissect a human body?"

Not many, says teacher Nancy Bowman, who created the unique class five years ago.

"We are a real rarity," Bowman said. "We are the only school in the nation to have a second-year program in advanced anatomy. Nobody else is teaching a program modeled after a gross anatomy course in medical school."

A few Ventura County high schools--such as Simi Valley, Oak Park and now Newbury Park High--offer courses in which students work briefly with cadavers.

But Westlake High's course is the only one in which students dissect cadavers every day for an entire school year, Bowman said.

"What I foresaw was a second-year program where students would do all the work and learn the body as they would in medical school," she said.

The students, all of them seniors, are required to take a year of chemistry and physiology before advanced anatomy. Bowman handpicks the students, who must endure a competitive application process.

Last spring, about 35 applicants vied for 20 positions. Bowman later accepted an additional four students. "You might say these are the cream of the crop," she said.

Those elite few enrolled in class say they love it and are thankful for the opportunities that the course offers.

"I can actually say there is no other class that has been as exciting as this," said Joshua Hess, 17. "It's a college on a high school campus."

The program started as an independent study class. Three years ago, it evolved into an advanced course with a formal curriculum. The program has grown from four students working on one cadaver to 24 students working on four cadavers.

Donning green smocks and white latex surgical gloves in a recent class, the students slowly rolled four porcelain gurneys into the center of the classroom and unzipped the thick, blue body bags that protect their cadavers.

Westlake High purchased the bodies for about \$650 each from UC San Diego Medical School's Body Donation Program with money raised through candy sales, donations and class fees.

The UCSD program supplies cadavers to about five schools in Southern California, medical school officials said. About 250 people donate their bodies each year. "These people consciously and willingly make that decision," Bowman said.

At the beginning of each school year, Bowman talks to students about how to approach the cadavers. "I do have to address the issue and how different people deal with it," she said. "You have to have a mature outlook on death."

Ellie said she has distanced herself from her male cadaver, identity unknown, which the students have nicknamed "Gus."

"I refer to it as an 'it'--not 'him'--because it doesn't bother you as much when you dissect," she said.

Most students in the class plan to attend major universities in the fall and eventually want to go to medical school. Studying human cadavers in high school will help them meet those goals.

"I'll have an edge on everybody else," said Brooke Shirey, 17, who aspires to be a cardiologist.

"We will be more confident because we've had this," said Andy Pan, 17. "When we're in premed and people are going, 'Tck,' we'll be prepared."

Bowman's students are gearing up for med school in other ways, too. During a field trip to the UCLA School of Medicine last year, the students viewed a 80-question test taken by first-year medical students.

The students have also welcomed guest speakers who discussed how to enter the medical profession.

Dr. Dennis N. Sakai, a Thousand Oaks orthopedic surgeon, visited in October. Although he had reservations about a cadaver class in high school, Sakai said he was impressed with the students.

"I had misgivings because I was afraid the kids wouldn't be mature enough to dissect a human cadaver," Sakai said. "But the kids are very serious.

"There has always been a fear of not taking the human body seriously. That hasn't been a problem in Westlake."

Conejo Valley Unified School District officials had reservations at first, too.

"I've worked with Nancy and (Principal) Curt Luft from the very beginning, and we spoke on issues of human dignity and security," said Assistant Supt. Richard Simpson, adding that the program has been well-supported by the community. "I have not had a single negative phone call."